From zero to hero: on the status of HE language teachers

A keynote speaker at last year's *Languages in higher education* conference inspired Annette Blühdorn to have her say.

Researching for a paper on the current situation of German and German Studies in schools and at HE-level in England, I dug out numerous reports and reviews that have recently been written about the status of modern foreign languages in the UK. Skimming through the *Nuffield Languages Report* (2000), *Research Review in Modern Languages* (Kelly 2006), *Languages Review* (Dearing 2007), *Language matters* (Rand 2009), and *Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England* (Worton 2009), it struck me how these reports had not just highlighted the challenges to the subject, but also offered detailed suggestions on how to improve the situation. However, have they actually changed anything? Are modern foreign languages in the UK any better now than they would have been without these extensive reports? Has anyone actually read all this material?

The answer to these questions came sooner than expected at the LLAS conference, *Languages in higher education: Raising the standard for languages* (London, July 2010). Professor Régis Ritz, in his keynote speech[1], made the point that most of the reports and campaigning projects hardly had any effect. The reason for this was that those addressed by the reports, namely language teachers, would simply not read them. This statement struck me. While I had realised that the various language reports had not managed to really change the situation of modern foreign languages in the UK, it had not occurred to me that this could be at least partly due to my own failure to read them. I had always assumed that they were addressed to someone higher up the university hierarchy.

"Whose fault is it?" Ritz asked. He did not provide an explicit answer to this question but continued his paper explaining that the situation of language teachers at HE-level was very gloomy. It was common for language teachers to work on an hourly-paid basis or as so-called visiting lecturers (c.f. Worton 2009, paragraphs 93 and 177). And the salaries even of those with a permanent contract were rather modest. Furthermore, there were hardly any career opportunities; on the contrary, language teachers often found themselves under significant pressure to justify their

[1]A recording of this keynote speech *European universities in need of HELP (Higher Education Language Policy)* is downloadable from **www.llas.ac.uk/video/6229#**

existence. In addition, the financial constraints of universities had made it necessary to move away from small-group teaching, which had a serious and mostly negative impact on language teaching and the situation of language teachers (c.f. Worton 2009, paragraphs 30 and 119).

Again, I was stunned. How true this was! It was uplifting to hear Professor Ritz, someone so remote from me in terms of hierarchy, expressing my situation so clearly. From my own experience and from what my language-teaching colleagues at other British universities tell me, it is true that there is often no recognition at all of what

> "those addressed by the reports, namely language teachers, would simply not read them"

we are doing. Many language teachers are native speakers of the language they teach, and many academic colleagues who do not teach languages believe that our job consists of walking into the classroom and doing what comes naturally: speaking our mother-tongue. What a gross misperception of the high level of linguistic expertise, pedagogical skills, and professional knowledge which specialised languages teachers command. But there is no other explanation for the poor reputation we have amongst non-linguists. As a consequence, language teachers and 'research-active' staff are often disconnected, which is a problem when the latter tend to be the decision makers.

Travelling home from the conference, all this was buzzing around my head. Maybe it was no coincidence that Ritz's question, "Whose fault is it that nobody seems to read our reports?" was directly followed by his portrayal of the situation of language teachers. For me, these two issues are clearly linked. Can language teachers – who are constantly given to understand that they are at the bottom of the departmental pecking order and whose work is constantly misjudged and undervalued – really be expected to study reports that come from the opposite end of the hierarchy? Personally I could not believe that they were written for me. As a language teacher what motivation is there to present academic papers, and hence to read language reports, in an environment that offers so little recognition for these activities?

I am not saying that language teachers are devoid of blame. Maybe we should fight for more recognition, insist on being involved in decision-making processes, and make colleagues aware of our achievements. After all, we are not only producing linguists who are highly sought after in the employment market, but we are also generating excellent student feedback for the National Student Survey. Another keynote speaker in London suggested that we should talk to our Heads of Department, the Dean or even the Vice-Chancellor about the situation of modern foreign languages and language teachers. Yes, we probably should. But given our current status, only a few heroes amongst us will perhaps have the confidence and connections to do so.

It is more difficult to stretch up from the bottom than to reach down from the top. At the moment, language teachers are at the bottom, and it would therefore be good if those at the top could occasionally reach down. I am sure this would result in major benefits not only for our students and the future of our discipline, but also for the international profile of HE language providers.

Have you been inspired by something you've read in *Liaison*?

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Then don't keep it to yourself. Get in touch with the editor, Paula Davis pd2@soton.ac.uk / 023 80593970

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